III

BEAUTY AND THE BLANTONS

STRUTHERS BURT

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BEAUTY AND THE BLANTONS

THE gardens were started by the Reverend Jeremiah Blanton—the first Blanton—somewhere in the middle '40s, four years after he had married for his second wife the rich Miss Almuce of Boston, who brought him a large fortune, a suppressed disposition, nothing of a figure, and complete liberty.

The last was fortunate, for without a change of climate the Reverend Jeremiah would have speedily joined numerous former members of his congregation in the bleak graveyard, laid out with a determination that death should be just as ugly as life, upon a treeless, rocky hillside of Gadsboro, Massachusetts. The Reverend Jeremiah had developed that frequent accompaniment of a Christian life, a pair of weak lungs. Simultaneously with this development, a cousin, a heretofore disregarded Blanton, died a childless old bachelor, leaving behind him a large plantation on the Cape Fear River in southern

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North Carolina. As he died intestate, Jeremiah Blanton, as the next of kin, inherited the estate: three hundred slaves, an immense old red brick house with white columns, many acres.

For a month or two after receiving word of this additional windfall, the Reverend Jeremiah had endured an unbroken spiritual gasp. Outwardly he was unchanged, but inwardly he was in a state of turmoil resembling that of a staring fish caught in a whirlpool. He wasn't in the least sure what was happening. In his more depressed moments he suspected that the whole thing was an assault on the part of the devil, determined to break down the rectitude of a leader of theological endeavor. In a way, it was bad enough that Dorcas was so rich—there was, when you came to think of it, a taint of the flesh and other abominations about such solid wealth—but then her wealth was honest wealth, sanctified by the most conservative of banking methods, and it had been his intention to use it for the benefit of the community at large and the furtherance of the gospel amongst the heathen of Africa in particular. But this second windfall displayed a different character; was

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blandishing, soft, cajoling, appealed richly to the imagination. Besides, there were the slaves. Slavery was an abomination before the Lord. He took his doubts to his wife.

She raised her pale gray eyes, bordered by heavy dark lashes, and regarded him thoughtfully.

"I have been thinking about it a great deal, too," she said, "and I have arrived at the conclusion that it is your duty to undertake whatever burden the Lord has seen fit to place upon your shoulders." Her meager voice was quite emotionless.

"Duty?" He had not thought of it in that light before.

"Yes, undoubtedly. If He had not desired you to be a Southern planter, Jeremiah, this inheritance would never have come to you. Possibly it is a test. If you cannot live as godly a life there as you can here, then it is a sign that there is a weakness somewhere. You are favored beyond most men; you are tested beyond most."

"But I do not believe in bondage, and they tell me these plantations cannot be worked in any other way."

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"That is but a further test. You have always taken an extreme interest in the soul of the black man, and now is your opportunity to work with him personally—my opportunity, too. You can found a church and introduce the true light—for I have no doubt that at present they are no better than infidels—and if, after a certain time, you still find the institution of slavery unchristian, you can set them free. At all events, I see in this a special call." She returned to her sewing with the quiet, demure closing of her lips with which she was used to conclude the rare expression of her opinions. She was a young woman; not over twenty-five; and there was a tradition that in her extreme youth she had had a tempestuous, unhappy love affair.

But the Reverend Jeremiah was not convinced; he was not convinced until three weeks later when his friend Doctor Frothingham told him the reasons for his lassitude and the perpetual cough that had recently afflicted him.

"If you stay here," said Doctor Frothingham bluntly, "you'll die."

"It is the Lord's will," replied Jeremiah meekly, already won over in his mind, but en-

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joying as usual, with gelid obstinacy, the prospects of an argument.

"The Lord's sheer nonsense!" retorted Doctor Frothingham. "Don't talk that way to me about the Lord. The Lord is a much more sensible man than you clergymen try to make him out. He gives us physical afflictions, like any other afflictions, in an effort to make real people out of mighty poor material. You get out of here. Didn't a cousin of yours die a little while ago and leave you a plantation in North Carolina? Well, you go there and live."

It was, of course, a direct revelation. Paul of Tarsus was not more clearly designated. There was some especial object; some future task Providence had in mind. Even Jeremiah's disputatious soul could no longer refuse to see the thing in any other way.

He arranged his affairs in Gadsboro, settled a large sum of money upon the church, which made its pulpit for all time a sinecure and a refuge for worthless young clergymen, and departed with his wife, his library, and his opinions for the Cape Fear River. The name and the circumstances attendant upon his going caused

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him to feel that in many ways he was a new Christian setting out for a new Celestial City. Only Christian had left his wife behind him and that, much as the Reverend Jeremiah mentally approved of the action, was more than a nineteenth-century New England Puritan could do. Women—lawfully mated—had their uses, as the same Paul of Tarsus had indicated.

At this time the Reverend Jeremiah was a man of forty-five; lank, clean-shaven, overlapping lipped, with a long narrow head and expressionless light eyes; the head and eyes slightly reminiscent of a proud, uncertain horse. His black hair was beginning to thin out on top, and he moved very briskly, with long strides, so that his black clothes flapped about him as he walked. He was the second son of a sea-captain and he had fled inland and to the bosom of the church because he had found the sea disturbing and boisterously tempting, and because, in the person of his father, he had seen how little compatible such a passion was with the calm indifference a converted man should show.

It must have been a curious sight, that August day of 1843, when the high leather-springed

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travelling-coach, covered with the mud and dust of half a county, turned in at the white gate-posts of "Holy Oak"—that was the name of the dead cousin's place—and rolled slowly up the half-mile avenue, overhung with gnarled gray trees festooned with drooping moss. On either side was the bare brilliance of the rice-fields, but the avenue was haunted by a perpetual golden gloom, sun-moted and iridescent. Two small colored boys ran on ahead, their eyes wide with excitement, and in front of the great brick house, and overflowing into the gardens that swept up from behind in a half-moon of breast-high hedges, were gathered a couple of hundred house-servants and field-hands, Mr. Martin, the general manager and chief overseer, at their head. Mr. Martin was dressed in white linen; a tall, slim, wiry, alert man, with black turned-down mustaches; inclined to be a trifle insolent, but very competent.

He took off his wide soft hat, which he wore at a rakish angle, and mopped his forehead with a silk handkerchief. "Here they come," he said unenthusiastically.

The coach swung around the circle before the

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house and stopped. McNab, the ancient butler, who despite his dark face wore an incongruous Highland name due to the Gaelic settlement of the country to the west, stepped forward and opened the door. There was a sigh of expectation. Jeremiah, lankier, grimmer, more tight-lipped than usual, travel-stained and slightly moist, descended blinking into the sunlight, and behind him appeared the slim, dove-gray figure of his wife.

"Welcome, Mr. Blanton!" said Martin gallantly. "You will find everything quite ready for your occupancy, Mrs. Blanton . . . allow me, ma'am." He came forward in welcome.

"You—are?" said Jeremiah.

"Martin, sir; your manager."

"Oh, yes. Well, Mr.—er, Maxim, have Mrs. Blanton shown to her room. . . . She is fatigued by the long journey."

"Martin, sir." The overseer remained bland.

"Mr. Martin." Jeremiah's manner was determinedly formal.

Jeremiah's rigid face and attitude of disapproval did not relax. He surveyed the assembled slaves without interest, and then following

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his wife and Martin, went up the long flight of brick steps that led to the terrace, and from there, up the shallow wooden steps to the great pillared porch of the house. His black figure lost itself in the shadows. The door opened and closed. He was inside his house. . . . It was three years later that the idea of the gardens came to him.

These three years had been in many ways years of disappointment to Jeremiah. He had found himself spiritually and physically at a loss. Physically he had not enough to do to satisfy the long hard muscles bequeathed him by pioneering ancestors, and spiritually his well-laid plans had gone astray. Martin was a most efficient manager; under his direction the plantation continued to prosper and the rotation of spring, summer, autumn, and winter passed with an automatic precision that resembled more the glittering infallibilities of machinery than the incertitudes of nature. Jeremiah pocketed his increasing profits and grew, if anything, sterner. In his bleak soul he was afraid of Martin. The man's skill and knowledge and hardy audacity abashed him. There was, when you

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came down to it, nothing to do except to ride around and inspect fields and assume an appearance of overlordship that was but a husk of the reality. And spiritually, the negroes had not taken kindly to the bare, white little chapel Jeremiah had built and in which at first he preached every Sunday. Jeremiah's ideas of religious worship were not suited to their colorful souls. Of course he could have enforced attendance, but debating this in his mind, he decided that such coercion would be placing a further emphasis upon the fact of a slavery which still troubled him greatly. He began to confine his theological efforts to ministering to the material comforts of the people dependent upon him, a task in which his wife Dorcas had long been active. Eventually they both began to attend, rather shamefacedly, the small Episcopalian parish church four miles distant. It was either this or else giving up church-going entirely, and Jeremiah consoled himself by the fact that the parish church was such a small church, and the services so simple, and the pews so uncomfortable, that a man felt almost as if he were worshipping in an edifice where the truth of religion was not so clouded.

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He and Dorcas saw few people. "Holy Oak" was a lonely and self-contained place. There were few neighbors and these few were widely scattered, and Jeremiah and Dorcas were aware that courteous as these neighbors were, and would be to a Blanton and his wife, they none the less regarded these newcomers as creatures of an outlandish derivation. The neighbors went to Charleston or Richmond for their gaiety, but Jeremiah and Dorcas once a year returned to Boston, where, for a month or two, they refreshed themselves in the bracing moral atmosphere of New England and, as far as Jeremiah was concerned, caught fresh colds.

It was on one of these trips that stopping off with a cousin, a Mr. Braithwhite, in Baltimore, Jeremiah had a glimpse of the heaven he was subsequently to create.

Mr. Braithwhite was a rose-fancier and an importer of exotic plants, and his most recent importations were some glossy self-reliant bushes which he spoke of as azaleas. He had brought them over from England. "And yet," he had added, "they grow wild all over our mountains. They are not so different, after all,

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from our Rhododendron ponticum or Rhododendron catawbiense, except that they have been greatly beloved and cared for and crossed with their cousins of China and Japan and India. It shows what love and kindliness and attention will do, doesn't it?"

He sighed. He was a little, plump, rosy-faced man; a great traveller; and he endured Jeremiah, as he endured every one else, because he was too kindly not to endure him. He had a way, however, of looking quickly up at Dorcas with a puzzled, sidelong intentness.

"Stop off again on your way South in the spring," he continued, "and I'll show them to you in bloom. I am not quite sure that this is the best climate for them. There are several gentlemen from Charleston greatly interested. Perhaps they would do well with you also."

Jeremiah decided to stop. For a long time the garden at "Holy Oak" had been bothering him; he did not know why, for gardens had never bothered him in Gadsboro, but this particular garden did. It was too much like an empty treasure-chest; like one of those empty treasure-chests he had known in his father's home.

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The background was there; long hedge-bordered walks, stretches of green turf, a little lake of sombre wine-colored water, great groves of live-oak from which the gray Spanish moss drooped like the ashes of wistaria; but the spirit was lacking; cohesiveness; any infusion of purpose. Jeremiah had told himself that this was due—and his homesickness as an adjunct of it—to a lack of variegated color, of simple brilliant flowers, of homely, sweet-smelling herbs, such as he had known in the brief summers of Gadsboro; and there were moments when he longed painfully for gray small rocks thrusting themselves up through the medley of July. Rather furtively he had planted some sweet-william and phlox and pansies and marigolds, but when these bloomed he had been disappointed. The sweet-william and phlox and pansies and marigolds seemed, somehow, out of place; the garden remained as it had been—haunted, postulant and supplicatory. Jeremiah was annoyed; he was afraid the climate of the South was beginning to have upon him its enervating effect.

Reveneered with New Englandism, black ex-

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cept where the dust had collected in the wrinkles of his coat and trousers, he appeared before Mr. Braithwhite two months later. It was a warm day.

Mr. Braithwhite's gardens slept in perfume and color; there was a great going to and fro of bees. Jeremiah and his cousin turned a corner.

Jeremiah stopped, his long upper lip, with the little beads of perspiration upon it, trembling.

Before him was a cloud of flame; a dawn-rose annunciation of beauty; something that hung between the blue of the sky and the green of the grass like the opalescent wings of a ship setting sail at sunrise.

"Are those the azaleas?" Jeremiah asked finally in a small voice.

"Yes," said Mr. Braithwhite.

Jeremiah did not speak again for a long moment.

"They are like the Rose of Sharon!" he said softly. He continued to twist together his harsh shiny-knuckled hands.

After a while he asked: "Do you think there is anything wrong—er—Nathaniel, in a clergy-

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man devoting himself to a garden? That is—er —a retired clergyman?"

Mr. Braithwhite's lively eyes showed signs of laughter, and then suddenly grew sad. "Far from it, my dear Jeremiah," he said gravely. "I can think of no more holy or fitting task. 'For I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse, I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honey-comb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk: eat, O friends; drink yea, drink abundantly, O beloved.' I will send you some bushes," he concluded in a matter-of-fact voice.

Jeremiah flushed. "Oh no, thank you!" he said hastily. "There is no reason for that. I will procure them myself."

It occurred to Mr. Braithwhite that the figure of Jason and his Golden Fleece, or perhaps better, the figure of Sir Perceval and The Grail, showed itself in many and strange reincarnations.

And Jeremiah did collect his own plants; he collected them all over the world wherever they were to be found. Dorcas, whenever she was able to do so, went with him. The cities and

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countries through which they passed seemed to have made little impression upon them except for the purposes of Jeremiah's voyages. They remembered nothing of London, only a tulip-garden or two in Holland; and the fact that there was an opera in Paris escaped them entirely, nor would they have gone to see it even if their religious scruples had permitted. They drifted about Europe in the tumultuous years following 1848 without the vaguest perception that they were witnessing history. In India they passed near the Taj Mahal and never knew it was there. But they met some missionaries. Meanwhile, Jeremiah's assortium grew: expanded like a trumpet-vine covering the brown and green restraint of a tree. There were pink azaleas the color of little clouds in the morning; there were azaleas the color of a stormy sunset; there were azaleas red as the blood of sacrifice; azaleas of the curious almost fawn rose of a young girl's lips (when natural); and white azaleas whose blanched perfection seemed to withdraw into itself scornfully at the prismatic flamboyancy of gayer relatives.

The gardens of "Holy Oak" were possessed

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with brilliant petals that reflected themselves in the quiet waters of the lake and lost themselves like the thin outer edge of flame beneath the festooned ashes of the live-oaks.

Jeremiah was always home in April when the azaleas bloomed, and Dorcas, with the thoughtfulness of a true partner and wife, somehow always managed to give birth to her children at about the same time. Her co-operation was frequent. In the eleven years between 1843 and 1854 she gave birth to four children, three of whom died. The cemetery at "Holy Oak," situated on a small island between two sluggish canals and overhung with trees whose moss, under the circumstances, seemed appropriately funereal, received almost as many additions in proportion as did Jeremiah's gardens. It was a rich soil growing richer. But enough children survived to carry on the purposes of this recital and the purposes of that strange intention which resolves that children should be born at all.

Dorcas became thinner and more silent; Jeremiah also became thinner, but strangely enough, in his latter years, developed a new garrulousness. He attended numerous meetings of horti-

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culturists and was famous for his wealth, his eccentricities, and the impassioned speeches, interlarded with scriptural quotations, in which he indulged at any moment, appropriate or otherwise. He was called "Blanton of Holy Oak," and the title that ten years before would have seemed to him a godless affectation, now did not displease him. Good fortune had clothed him with a sort of gangling self-assurance. He could not abide contradiction except from Martin, and this he seldom provoked, because in Martin's presence he seldom ventured an opinion. He had even ceased worrying about slavery. Like Aristotle, he had come to the conclusion that great civilizations are built upon the enforced labor of inferior men.

Only once in all these years had his world needed questioning, and then only for a short time, and then, because of an incident so abnormal, so startling, so beside anything he had ever heard or experienced, that subsequently he was able to dismiss it from his mind as a man would the misty grotesques of fever.

This is what had happened. Jeremiah had gone out of his house one moonlit night in April

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—this was ten years after his coming to "Holy Oak," seven years after he had started his garden. He had kissed Dorcas and sent her up to her room. But as for himself, he was not yet ready for bed, for he wanted to walk and see his azaleas by night; wanted to smell the drowsy perfume that was like dusk itself.

The gardens shimmered in the yellow light; the masses of flowering bushes—still small individually, by no means the wilderness of bloom they were to become in later generations—seemed caught by some expectancy of the hour, some moment before the moment when a secret tale, mysterious but translucent, is related; under the live-oak trees the ground was spread with a magic tapestry. Jeremiah walked slowly, his hands clasped behind his back, turning his head from side to side; a quaint sombre figure, like a detached and migratory shadow. A mocking-bird broke suddenly into song. At the end of half an hour, Jeremiah retraced his steps and entered the house and went soberly up to his room.

He opened the door quietly lest he disturb his wife, and then, with a hollow feeling, as if

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all but his bones had dropped away from him, he stepped back against the door so that he was once more in the shadow. He was not sure that he was not seeing a ghost. His hand bit into the glass knob until its hard edges cut him.

The room was filled with a soft radiance that made the opposite walls look diaphanous and unenclosing. Along the wide, open windows the white muslin curtains hung motionless. The only solidity was the black bulk of the great four-poster bed. A recurrent breath of perfume, vague and hesitant, compounded of moonlight and azaleas and wild plum and honeysuckle, rose and fell. The mocking-bird sang. And at the heart of this witchery of light and shadow and inhalation, danced a silver figure slowly, its arms outspread. About its shoulders dusky hair hung like a cloud.

Jeremiah Blanton pressed closer to the door; the blood slowly suffusing his horror-stricken eyes and beginning to sing in his temples. . . . This was his wife; this was the woman to whom he had been married eleven years; the mother of his four children, three of them dead; a woman of thirty-five; a godly woman; and she was dancing naked in the moonlight!

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At first he did not know what to do. The dark fears of forefathers not so remote chilled his heart. For all he knew, this might be sorcery; an overtaken nightmare; a changeling with whom all unsuspecting he had shared his life. Perhaps if he stepped forward the silver column, which was his wife, would sink in ashes at his feet, or even worse, take wings into the night, leaving behind a question forever unanswered and a screaming terror of the mind. Then Jeremiah's better sense prevailed and his lips tightened. This figure was not alarming, it was merely outrageous. (As a matter of fact, it was only pathetically slim and childlike.) Jeremiah's mind did not form the following words, yet he experienced a sense of astonishment that Dorcas, seen this way, was still so young and urgent and wind-blown. Wind-blown was not his adjective; neither was urgent—he had never used such adjectives in his life; but he had an impression of wildness and youth. He had another sensation as well, an even more disturbing one; a sudden quick rippling of the heart. Possibly in the remote past some of his seafaring ancestors had loved women who had

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danced before them this way in the dusks of tropic twilights.

Jeremiah stifled his heart—in fact, he refused to understand it; he stepped forward, an avenging fury.

"Dorcas!" he said in a terrible voice.

She paused, and he thought he could hear the startled beating of her pulses. She seemed to shrink into herself, as if the necromantic metamorphosis he had dreaded was about to take place, and then, without a word, without even an exclamation, in utter silence, she went over to the bed and picking up her nightgown, thick and long and buttoned to the throat, slipped it on.

"Get down and pray," said Jeremiah icily; "and ask God to forgive you. I will see you later!"

He found his way blindly back to the garden. Where the tracery of the live-oaks was thickest he knelt down.

"O God," he murmured, "O King of All, who knows the hearts of thy servants, and their comings in and goings out, interpret for me this shame and blackness. . . . But do not blame

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her, O God—do not blame her too much, for she is a woman and weak. Yea, the fault is mine. I have fallen away too much from the straight and narrow path; I have eaten of the flesh-pots; I have erred too much in the ways of softness and the world. In the beauty of temporal things I have forgotten the beauty of the life everlasting. Help me, O God; help me and let me find again the way!"

Into the silence that fell after he had ceased, the presence of the garden seemed to step once more; shining, absorbed, passionate. Jeremiah got to his feet and blinked back at the radiance. Then a slow thought came to him. . . . The trouble with Dorcas, he reflected, was that she was not sufficiently occupied. She had had no children for considerably over two years. She should have more children. It would be his Christian duty to see to that. In his selfish pursuit of his azaleas he had neglected her spiritual guidance. Women without children were incalculable. He would go up and speak to her about it at once. . . . And never again was the subject of her madness mentioned between them.

This was in 1853, and in 1859, when he was

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sixty years old, the Reverend Jeremiah Blanton died; and a year later his wife, Dorcas, as if there was very little left in life to hold further her curiosity, followed his example.

It was fortunate that Jeremiah died when he did, for within two years his heart would have been torn in a manner more terrible than any he had ever imagined. His fundamental instincts would have found themselves at war with his recently acquired habits of thought, and probably he would have fallen into the unenviable position of those Southern landholders who, brought up north of the Mason and Dixon line, were unable either to desert their States or their nation. As it was, he departed this life fully convinced that the talk of secession was merely the idle chatter of the hot-headed politicians of a neighboring State. Possibly it was also fortunate that he did not live to see Jeremiah II, now a youth of sixteen, drinking iced whiskey with Mr. Martin on the back porch of a summer evening. Mr. Martin was by now a gray, distinguished, bitter-tongued man of fifty-two, with no morals whatsoever outside of business hours.

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With Jeremiah II we have little to do, nor with Dorcas II, his sister, who married ten years later, and moved to Savannah, and died angrily of the fever. Jeremiah II had the misfortune to belong to a war generation, a fact which makes a man historically important but individually uninteresting. It is the generation following a war that rewards study. Second lieutenants are magnificent but too epochal; too much made and ruined by events too great for them. They cease to become men and become symbols; and try as they may, in the nuances of their souls, they remain symbols always, never quite getting over what they imagine they have got over.

Jeremiah II had no such doubts as would have troubled his father. At the first signs of hostility he joined a cavalry regiment and four years later was discharged a captain. He was a black-haired white-faced man, completely semi-tropical. When he returned to "Holy Oak," although he was only twenty-four, he was an old man; his digestion ruined, his left arm practically useless, his veins full of rheumatism. He seldom spoke except in expletives. The bland

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Mr. Martin, a full colonel, had been killed at the battle of Cold Harbor.

Jeremiah married a girl from Virginia and spent most of his time out on the terrace denouncing a fate which, in political matters, had behaved so scurvily. In reality he was better off than the majority of his neighbors, since enough of the Almuce fortune had been left in Northern enterprises to insure against complete ruin. The only important fact of Jeremiah II's life, outside of his having been a soldier, was that he had a son, Jeremy, born in '69, five years before Jeremiah II's death at the age of thirty.

In the third generation the name Jeremiah had been softened to its French derivative. Outwardly the last race of New England had disappeared.

Mrs. Blanton, used to misfortune and released from the paralyzing influence of her husband, expanded amazingly. She tightened her lips and set herself to the task of bringing up the young Jeremy and running, upon an inadequate income, a large estate. She even found time, and money, pinched together from little surpluses left from other expenditures, to pre-

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vent the gardens from returning to a jungle. They were no longer stately, or tended, or obviously a luxury, but they began to have a certain new wild beauty of their own, as if the azaleas were stretching their limbs like dryads broken loose from captivity. The young Jerry lost himself under the pink bloom in the spring. The soft girlish tired voice of his mother called him. He remembered that.

But he was a difficult person to bring up; morally, not physically. Physically he grew straight and tall and black-haired like his father; with his father's white face and brilliant eyes and thin features; but morally from an early age he began to exhibit the uncomfortable obstinacy derived from his grandfather and the occasional exciting, but alarming, rages of his grandfather's son. Mrs. Blanton adored him, and feared him, and brooded over him as a mother, especially a mother who has been beautiful and knows something of what men are, will. She need not, however, have feared for his future along certain lines. Under the pallor of the South was the dourest kind of determination when aroused. The dour blood of seafaring

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men who had ridden out storms and taken slaves, and, when trade was slack, had even sailed perilously close to piracy, and the dour blood of zealots who had enjoyed nothing so much as fighting the devil, particularly when the devil seemed to have an initial advantage. There had been a Blanton famous for his detection and persecution of Molly Brindlekirk, of Haverstraw, Mass., who, without doubt, and while she was bedridden, had at the age of seventy taken to riding a broom and milking the neighbors' cows.

Jeremy developed three senses: a sense of anger—at men who had taken away what was his and didn't care that they had; a sense of selective devotion, the concentration, that is, upon the few people and things he really cared for—his mother and "Holy Oak"; and a sense of indifference to the world at large. The man who has a clear sense of anything is armed as a rule above his neighbors, but the man who has several senses, well defined, is completely embattled; is dangerous to interfere with—has eyes that are far-sighted and not easily confused. Behind such eyes lies the fundamental secret of

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success; the ability, that is, to endure any amount of present punishment in order to gain a distant end. Men are failures not because they are stupid but because they are not sufficiently impassioned. The really cold man is never successful, for although the successful man may seem cold, somewhere there is a hidden pressure. Only the non-observant think the Puritan frigid; the Puritan is made of the same stuff as his enemy the convinced drunkard; both are passionate seekers lacking perspective.

Nothing could have kept Jeremy away from New York. As soon as he could think he was impatient to go there, and when he got there, it is doubtful if any man ever spent sixteen years in such a great city and remained so little intrinsically affected. New York neither stirred Jeremy's pulses nor compelled his affection. He made many friends and cared not two straws whether he ever saw them again or not; and he was careful not to make any intimate friends except those who would be useful to him in his career. When necessary, he sacrificed a friend if it were possible to do so without creating an impression of disloyalty. His looks and his

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charming manners gained him a reputation for cordiality he did not deserve. In reality his mind sat far off, like an eagle watching a valley, and when the time came it plummeted with deadly accuracy. Jeremy was not ethical; but then, few men of the '90s and early 1900s were. The kindly exteriors of to-day, the small smiling moral speeches, cover, as a rule, in men over fifty very rapacious young fellows of three decades ago. Those alive to-day who were alive thirty years ago, and who think that the present age has retrogressed spiritually, have a quaint conception of locomotion.

And the sardonic point of the jest was that Jeremy deceived those who most thought they were deceiving him; deceived them by his drawling voice, his courtesy, his dreamy appearance, and the tradition that the South was easy-going and shiftless. These qualities and this tradition made for a lowering of guards. Afterward, the injured man was a trifle hazy as to what had hit him; was inclined to lick the punishing hands like a lion whose keeper has beaten him.

Jeremy's secret life was as carefully premedi-

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tated as his public life. At times it was necessary for him to get drunk—life became unendurably lonely, unsatisfactory, and taut—and when this necessity grew unbearable he went out and got drunk with white-faced intentness and efficiency. But he never got drunk where anybody could tell about it afterward; and when he was drinking he never did anything else but drink. He was always quite sober when he made love to certain shallow young women and nearly frightened them out of their wits.

During these periods of incandescence his concentration upon the goal of his present life relaxed and the memory of "Holy Oak" surged back into his mind. It was like the opening of the windows of a closed house in spring. Jeremy would see again the flame-colored apotheosis of the garden; the old brick house; the figure of his mother; the little shadowy island between the canals where, below the garlanded live-oaks, the graves of his family thrust up like eternally unanswered question-marks. And he would say to himself: "O God, how is this possible? How is it possible that the finest things in a man's life are mixed up with the worst? Why is it a man

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understands so much when he's drunk? How is it possible that a man's heart can melt so to his mother and harden to this sort of business? Why can't we see the world as a whole, so that we would no more hurt ourselves or those we do not know well than we would hurt those we love? We are all the same; all equally to be hated or loved. The mother of to-day is only the girl of yesterday; the man you fight is only the little boy of awhile back." Then he would take another drink.

Quite drunk, Jeremy would go home to his boarding-house apartment and, tilting a chair against the wall, would stare at nothing and wrestle with these problems.

The next morning he would wake up very pale and determined and a trifle ill, and go about his business as if nothing had happened. He forced himself to forget entirely, and his shakiness only added to his zest for work by giving him something more to overcome.

Occasionally his mother visited New York and at rare intervals he managed to run down to "Holy Oak" for a week or two. He would have liked to have had his mother live with him, but

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he knew she would never leave her wardenship, and he did not ask her.

Meanwhile, he was prospering greatly. At thirty he was well-to-do; at thirty-one, by a stroke of fortune and a not too great scrupulousness as to where he stood when it fell, he became an exceedingly rich man. He allowed himself some privileges. The first of these was to marry a blond, quiet, gray-eyed girl with whom he had been in love for five years. Her name was Cecily Sloan and she belonged to a family of social pretensions and little money. Jeremy and she made a remarkable-looking couple; he dark and straight, and she slim and upright and appealing, something about her like a silver-beech tree at noon.

A year or so after his marriage, Jeremy said to her in his soft, caressing voice: "Honey, you wouldn't mind very much if you left all this and went back with me to that place of mine, would you? You see, I've got to go, because—" he finished rather obscurely—"my going there is the reason for my coming to New York."

She smiled, and then, as if she was listening to something very young and ingenuous, touched his hair with a little pinching touch.

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"You know less about women," she said soothingly, "than any other man on earth. . . . And that's saying a good deal. Men are queer. They'll never get over worrying about where to live on account of their wives, when it would be so much easier and cheaper just to keep on loving them. The only time a woman cares where she lives is when she's stopped caring for a man, and the only time she stops caring for a man, if she ever has really cared, is when he stops caring for her. You invented caves, we didn't—we're wild and itinerant."

Which was fairly advanced for a quiet, gray-eyed girl of that period.

But if Jeremy knew nothing about women, he had begun to learn something about life. That something he had learned the previous winter. Up until then he had believed that life was exactly what a man—especially a man like himself—wished it to be. Afterward, for all time, he realized there are certain outer barriers before which the human will, no matter how adamant, falls back baffled and amazed; that intention and eagerness and determination have their limits. He learned all this because, one

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day, sitting in his office, a telegram was handed to him. He opened the envelope carelessly, and then let it fall to the floor while he stared out of the window.

Across the roofs of the near-by office-buildings, serrated here and there by the long shafts of the earlier skyscrapers, he could see, beneath a soft February sky, the sparkling ribbon of the river, on it a steamer putting out to sea. Suddenly he could no longer see the roofs or the sky or the steamer.

He got to his feet and began to walk up and down. His heart was a crumbling fire inside of him. "O God!" he said to himself. "O God!" and he picked up a book and hurled it from him. The desires of mankind seemed to him pitifully feeble. . . .

He went down to "Holy Oak" that afternoon. His mother was buried two days later. A breathless, wintry, gray day when the hanging moss had an appearance of watching rigidity. Jeremy wished it was April with the azaleas out. . . .

It was two years after this that Jeremy found himself able to leave New York.

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Jeremy was very gay; he hadn't been so gay for years. All the way South, the car-wheels seemed to be saying to him: "You're done! You're done! You're done! You've just begun! begun! begun!" He perplexed Cecily by his youth and unexpectedness and mischief.

He watched constantly her rapt face as she stared out of the window. He thought to himself: "It's all behind you, my son, that damned city! All behind you! No more of it for you, except when you go up there with Cecily and buy it for her."

He had arranged his affairs so that the date of their arrival should fall in April. The train came to the little station that served "Holy Oak," and he saw Melchior, his colored man, waiting with a team. His heart almost choked him. This was what he had been waiting for; this was the end of his journey. He handed Cecily to the platform.

At the end of a mile drive, the carriage turned through the white gate-posts and rolled slowly up the long avenue between the live-oak trees, as, sixty years before, the coach of Jeremiah I and Dorcas had rolled. The live-oaks looked as

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trim and well-tended as their shaggy age would permit—for three years Jeremy had kept a large force of men restoring them, and pruning and grading. At the end of the avenue, above the terrace, the old ruddy house, facing the sinking sun, was like a giant wine-cup held up in welcome.

"Oh, Jerry!" said Cecily breathlessly.

"We'll go up and dress and bathe," he retorted indifferently. "And then you come down and I'll show you the gardens."

She shook her head smilingly. "But I want to see the house first."

"No, you come down. The azaleas will be in bloom. There're some nice Cherokee roses, too."

He was cunningly unconcerned. He chuckled inwardly at his success in deceiving her into thinking that the azaleas were nothing very extraordinary after all; a few bushes planted by his grandfather. He enjoyed her implicit faith in his deception.

He went up-stairs and plunged into the cool soft water of the bath that had been run for him, and changed into a soft shirt and old flannels and a shooting-jacket. The house was full

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of warm shadows and silvery reflections. When he was through he went down to the terrace and waited for Cecily. He was as impatient as a small boy watching the outcome of a cherished trick.

The sun sank lower; he was afraid Cecily wouldn't be in time to catch the full color; and then he saw her coming toward him, slender and white and golden-haired, the light shining into her gray eyes.

"Come along!" he begged, and took her by the hand and hurried her along the narrow walk where the breast-high hedges of Jeremiah I's time had grown into two walls of concealing greenness. Beyond was a sunken garden where a white mass of the roses he had mentioned spread a delicate carpet.

She wanted to stop here, entranced, but he led her on.

At the end of the sunken garden, beyond a sun-dial of wood carved into the semblance of a Grecian column, was another massive hedge overtopping the view beyond, and in its exact centre an opening had been cut, flanked high on either side by privet trained to represent proud

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and alert guinea-fowl. Jeremy and Cecily skirted the garden, and turned the corner of a bed of roses, and paused in the opening. Five stone steps, lichen-covered, led down to the little wine-colored lake, and across the lake, beneath the spreading plantations of the live-oak, the evening radiance of the azaleas burned.

The moment, the lapse of time since the buds had first opened, the blend of sky and air and shadow, seemed to have struck together into a note so perfect that you knew when its echoes died away not for a long while would such beauty be realized again. Beneath the gray pallor of the Spanish moss blossomed leaping flames that had been caught at their crest by a magic wand and held immovable; a sea of rose conflagration; the heart of the passion in nature you see when the sun sinks in the Occidental ocean. And yet it was a beauty of itself, and, like all true beauty, only to be defined in its own terms; moreover, it was the beauty of a growing thing; transient, changing in a myriad small ways, even as you looked and were unaware of the change. In the wine-colored lake the reflections floated, a mist of rose.

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Cecily paused with parted lips, the color rising into her cheeks and then receding, her hand going up to her breast. "You devil!" she said softly to Jeremy. "You wicked, wicked devil!" She turned her smiling face away; her voice was uncertain. "It almost makes you want to cry, doesn't it?" she said.

Jeremy laughed quietly . . . he had found at last complete happiness, permanent and assured. . . . At least, he thought he had. So have many other men.

"Holy Oak" changed as the years passed. Jeremy and Cecily no longer had to go to New York, or Charleston, or Europe to see people, because people came to see them. Some of the surrounding places were bought by rich Northerners, and with the emergence of the motor-car the world became incredibly foreshortened. Jeremy could get into his big car and if the weather was good, in two days, or three, be almost anywhere he wanted to be. In an instant life grew more magic and at the same time possessed of infinitely more capacity for boredom. Jeremy had always had men and their wives down for the shooting, but now "Holy Oaks"

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began to expand into something like its pre-Revolutionary gaiety; and from the growing resorts of Aiken and Camden and Pinehurst friends came to see "the dear Blantons" and "their marvellous place." The gardens enjoyed an increasing fame! a fame almost equal to their neighbors to the south. Strangers made them an object of pilgrimage. Also there was the young Dorothy, who in a few years from now—seven, eight . . . would be wanting house-parties herself.

Long before, Jeremy had made a compromise with himself and his wife, and the devil. It was an old, childish sort of compromise. You assumed that a thing which existed did not exist; that something which took place did not take place; that four or five times a year you counted out entirely a week or so of excellent, solid, twenty-four-hour-a-day days. You erased them, that is, as you would a blur of chalk from a blackboard. Or rather, in reality, the other way around, for the blur was black and the board was white. The year came to have only three hundred and thirty, or three hundred and thirty-seven days, instead of three hundred and sixty-five.

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When Jeremy had first found this old calenture of desire coming upon him he had been contemptuous; he had refused to believe in it; he had put it down to physical causes; the relaxation of too much good fortune; not enough exercise. He was a full-grown man, completely master of himself. These uneasy longings were a chimera. Life poured itself into a mould of his own making; it had always been so; always would be so. Never but once had he found anything so intractile that he could not bend it, as it were, between his long sinewy fingers, and that once had been his mother's death. Since then he had obliterated death from his consciousness, limiting his horizon as a fighting-man limits his class. He wanted to forget the conception of defeat. Now here was defeat staring him in the face in a much more subtle guise than ever before. Those nights in New York had been different. He had deliberately planned them; deliberately set out upon them; deliberately left them behind. They had not conquered him; instead, he had used and conquered them, Jeremy did not know that black blood, as said before, is black blood no matter how expressed.

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The first time he had gone to Charleston he had made himself the excuse that he wished to consult the library there in connection with a pamphlet he was writing. For a day or so he had kept himself to his task. The weather was very hot; the houses along the Battery slept in a gray haze. The third night, Jeremy had fled along the narrow walled streets like a shadow pursued by shadows. . . .

When he came back to "Holy Oak" he was very much ashamed of himself. Something inside of him had been damaged; not broken, but weakened—a pride, a self-assurance; and he was never to get it back again. It seemed impossible to him that he and Cecily and this other self of his could all exist together in the same house. But they did; and they continued to exist. He never told Cecily, but she knew. Never by word or sign, however, did she show her knowledge except that when his restless spells came upon him her tenderness and solicitude redoubled. Only once was this pretense broken through and that was on a moonlight night when Jeremy had suddenly put his head down on his wife's knees and sobbed. She had

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said nothing; neither had he. They both wanted to speak, but somehow couldn't. They had been pretending things too long. And as for Jeremy, he dared not break with the burden of his words the wall of protection he felt—quite mistakenly—he had built up between Cecily and that part of him he would not have her know.

The room where this happened was the same room in which Dorcas sixty years before had danced; the moonlight was there; the translucence; the smell of azaleas and wild plum and honeysuckle; even a mocking-bird. But this time it was a Jeremiah who tasted humiliation and not a Dorcas.

Sometimes Jeremy thought he had won this wearying conflict. There were long periods when he was tranquil and absorbed and during which he caught back most of his old self-confidence, and on the whole his personality improved. Relieved of competition, he enlarged; became singularly lovable and gentle and humorous, saving his fierceness for the occasional stranger who crossed him.

Eventually the War came and he bundled off to Washington with his usual precipitant dreami-

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ness, and by means of his position and wide acquaintanceship got himself made a captain in the Quartermaster Corps. Later he was sent to France, where he did something marvellous with garbage, and was decorated, and promoted to a colonelcy, and sent home full of honors and sardonicism. Occasionally the thought of the azaleas had disturbed him.

But Cecily had attended to the azaleas. She was as capable as his mother and had considerably more to be capable with.

For a few months after Jeremy's return his path proved to be a singularly peaceful one. The break in ordinary routine the war had made, possibly its discipline, had given him apparently a new retention upon himself, a new hold. He began to hope that the sinister strength which so often had beaten him to his knees was beginning to weaken. And then once again, as if to show him that living is largely an oscillation between the conquest of self and defeat by circumstances, he received a telegram. He was in Washington at the time.

He hurried back to "Holy Oak." As he knelt by her bed, Cecily stroked his hair. "Dear Jer-

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ry!" she said. "Dear, lovely Jerry. And so beautiful, too; no one knows you the way I do, do they? Dear, lovely, beautiful Jerry. I'm glad I married you and your azaleas. Poor Jerry! Funny Jerry! . . ."

Jeremy decided that life was a matter of building sand castles in the face of a threatening sea. You built your castle, you elaborated it, you made turrets and tunnels and banqueting-halls, and then a wave came and washed it away. Sometimes, if the wave was a very large one, it took you with it and for a while buffeted you in the surf; blinded you; drowned you; until, as if weary with its roughness, it cast you back half dead upon the shore. Whereupon, you got weakly to your feet and built another castle. But you weren't quite so strong as you had been the first time nor quite so enthusiastic. Every one did this, except a few narrow-faced people who, looking about them timorously, went inland and camped upon the farther dunes, safe but uninterested.

Why did you do this? Why in this world did you build things you knew would be washed away? Was it only because you wished to keep

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your mind off the constant menace of the sea and pretend that between it and yourself you were constructing actually a defense?

Dorothy was growing up. Jeremy directed his attention upon her. Dorothy was seventeen; with bobbed blond hair and a ravishing, slim figure that looked like a boy's figure that had suddenly decided to become more gracious. Dorothy also had the bluest of blue eyes under long lashes and an assortment of words, gathered at boarding-school, which made Jeremy wonder how the young of his own generation had expressed themselves as well as they had. He was a little afraid of Dorothy; afraid lest some day she would find him too sentimental and descriptive. Her conversation was pointed, acute, and Doric; her point of view direct and sparse. She knew all about life except what life really is.

Jeremy took Dorothy abroad and stayed there two years. He was startled, amused, and made a trifle angry to find that full-grown Englishmen and Italians actually wanted to marry Dorothy, some of them men of great position who should have had more serious minds. Jer-

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emy was a very good-looking man himself at this period; lean, graceful, sunburned, with iron-gray hair and a black mustache. Numerous ladies whose ages were as disproportionate to his as their countrymen's were to Dorothy's cast languishing eyes upon him, but in vain. Upon his return from Europe he turned Dorothy over to his mother-in-law and allowed that excitable lady to give all the dinners and dances and various other parties for which her starved soul had been longing. In the spring he took Dorothy down to "Holy Oak" again.

He had not dared go there before; but he found, once there, what all mature people find sooner or later, or should find, and that is that a place once greatly beloved may be sad but is never unbearable, since all spirits who have once loved it continue to inhabit it. He became almost happy again. The house was never empty. A blond caravan that got about the country by means of high-powered cars followed Dorothy. The members of it appeared unexpectedly, were very polite to Jeremy—some of them irritatingly polite—wooed the object of their quest with an odd, passionate indifference, and then

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went away again. The object was equally indifferent. There were also some very nice neighbor boys, who looked just like the other boys and had the same high-powered cars. There was one especially—William Humphrey. Jeremy thought he detected an even more passionate indifference in Dorothy's manner toward William, and took this as a good sign. Dorothy was nineteen.

He was sitting in his library one night reading. The month was April and the azaleas were in full bloom and the windows of the great book-lined room were open. He heard a motor on the drive outside—that would be William. Dorothy had said that he was coming. He heard Dorothy's fresh young voice uttering words of greeting, followed by a silence, followed by something very earnest and low-toned from William; and then Dorothy's voice once more, but this time with a new, excited contralto note in it.

"Here? Just now? Oh, Billy, don't be so absurd! You really mean it? Me? Come out into the garden and we'll talk it over."

Jeremy got to his feet and began to pace up

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and down. "He's proposing to her, the young pup! Proposing from the front seat of a car! Probably leaning back from the wheel while she's standing up! Well—different times——"

The door of the car opened and shut; William's feet made a creaking sound upon the gravel as he descended to the drive; voices and steps died away.

Jeremy continued to pace the room. Presently the footsteps and the voices returned and crossed the porch and entered the house. They were in the hall just beyond the door.

"Come out into that garden again," said the boy's voice eagerly, "after you've got your coat."

Dorothy's laugh was clear; a small tinkling, slightly metallic bell. "Garden? No more of that garden to-night, my child. It makes you sloppy and hard to control. You take me out in your car and go fast. When we're married we'll live in New York, and see these gardens about once a year and then at high noon. Brr! They're creepy! They remind me of lockets with hair in them. When you've lived with azaleas as much as I have, William, you'll think less of them."

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The voices went back to the closet under the stairs, repassed, went outside. There was the sound of the starting of the engine, a rasp of controls, a departing murmur of wheels.

Jeremy had not moved from the spot where he had paused. His head was sunk forward on his chest; his drooping figure had lost its alertness. . . . So this was the final defeat! The final sardonic laughter! His little girl! The symbol of eighty years! Of the lives of six people! And she thought these things!

He turned and walked unseeingly to a window at the back of the room from whose level, above the sunken garden and the hedge beyond, the heart of the real garden was visible. There they were, the azaleas, dreaming under the moon.

Jeremy leaned for a long while upon the sill before his tired brain began to form connected visions. What was this thing? This beauty? This incredible hurt and alleviation? This loveliness that surrounded you and beckoned you and yet could not be made part of you? This thing you smelled, touched, saw, drank in, and yet could not lay hold of? Permanent, encompassing,

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close; more real than flesh that passed, or laughter that was silenced, or tears that were dried, and yet never completely incorporated? The moving spirit of every man's life; the thing that impelled him; however distorted and base his conception of it might be. What was it? Why did men seek it, when they knew they could only touch the outer hem of its garments?

The moonlight over the azaleas seemed to grow deeper, fuller, more complete.

What was this beauty you never knew until you had almost lost it; you could not feel until you had felt agony and ugliness?

Jeremy, forced back to the inner citadel of his thoughts, saw for the first time clearly what all this had meant to his own race—the repressed lost passions of his grandfather, that grim old man; the broken desires of his father; the quiet radiance of his mother; his own tortured, bitter pursuit. And Cecily! He stretched out his arms.

"My little love!" he said to himself. "My little love!"

They were all there—out in the azaleas. Not as individuals, but more than individuals;

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greater than individuals; the essence of them; their ultimate yearnings for loveliness. Caught up and made eternal. As his yearnings some day would be. Yes, and Dorothy's too. She and all her pathetic, self-steeled little generation; driven back into themselves, frightened before they were men and women by a horror which, not being able to interpret, they were attempting to forget. But they would learn some day . . . learn about this mystery you never knew until you had almost lost it; could not feel until you had felt agony and ugliness first; could not touch until most of your youth and half your own beauty were gone. . . . Why, the thing was an epitome of his whole country; this beauty, this garden, which was one of its expressions. His scarred, beautiful, blinded, struggling country. The tragic repression of the first decades; the broken passions of the middle period; the half-tender, half-brutal savagery of his own time striving to build securely in a changing world; the hardness of this new generation—hard lest their hearts be touched too greatly.

But it was there eternally, this beauty. It was strong; it did not die; it could not die. It was a

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sign that there was eternity. Beauty did not die —no, nor love, which was part of it.

He raised his head.

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